

A cat

– a reflection based on Pontus Pettersson's "Cat Practice"

By Frida Sandström

The cat is the black block without a train. The cat is one singular and it exists in the thousands. That's why we're shooting it. We are drowning or driving over it. But the cat is still there. On the street, in the kitchen. It strokes your leg, licks your butter. The cat is there, but it's not there for you. Hence as a choreographic figure, the cat is very urgent. It does not stick to the image, it takes over the image. The cat does not perform someone else's score but tears up your notes with a smile. You can't meet the cat's gaze, it meets you.

When it comes to documentation as well as performing choreography and performance, the cat moves beyond a linear, Western understanding of time and presence. Its shape invalidates the inherent perspectives from which the bodily movement is performed and read vertically. The cat turns obstinate, it demands something else. In choreography, it distorts the understanding of yourself as the performer of the movement - and the time and space with it. The cat is independent of such dimensions. The cat is here now.

In the essay *Time is out of Joint*, Jacques Derrida writes that time inevitably disappears. It is not possible to mourn - it "mourns itself".¹ The cat refuses to cry, it does not hang on to the lost moment – it is the moment itself. In this way, the loss of what once was is absent.

For the cat, it does not end, it is never over or passed. It just is. In Lauren Berlant's and Lee Edelman's book *Sex, Or the Unbearable*, Edelman writes that the adorable creates a type of anesthesia, to avoid the affective supersaturation that would alienate the feeling from the (adorable) object itself.² The cat is adorable, but it refuses to let our emotions take over. In

¹ Derrida, J. "Time is Out of Joint", in. *Deconstruction Is/In America. A New Sense of the Political*. Haverkamp, A., ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1995), p. 23.

² The adorable, in a related way, anesthetizes feeling—or rather creates a paradoxical entity: an anesthetic feeling, a feeling that aims to protect against the overintensity of feeling and an attachment that can survive detachment from the particularity of its objects. – Berlant, L. In Berlant L. and Edelman, L. *Sex, or the Unbearable*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 17.

other words, the cat counteracts the optimistic well-being evoked in the meeting with the adorable, and which would result in the cat's absolute submission to these externally emanating emotions.³

The cat is adorable, but it doesn't allow us to make use of it. It gets up and walks away. It takes the present with it and does what Berlant calls "breakup", which demonstrates "the non-relationship that conventional relationship-optimism entails".⁴ We may not be together, but we can imagine that we are. We are optimistic. We think we and the cat have a relationship, but it does not work that way. The cat is a cynic but in its own specific way.

The term "cynicism" originally comes from the Greek and refers to "dog-like". The word is said to have been used to describe a group of Athenians who chose to live a simple life on the streets. One of them was the philosopher Diogenes, who used to be called dog due to his ascetic lifestyle. He is said to have approved this, which he himself explained with the words: "while other dogs bite their enemies, I bite my friends to protect them."⁵

So, what does Diogenes have to do with the cat? The dog is kept on a leash and works for the police. But the cat? It licks its fur. At first glance of its rough tongue, you realize that you have not really got it. There you stand, with hands full of love that you in fact would really need for yourself, and the cat is already gone. You were not allowed to pat it, not even a small purr was given to you as a confirmation of your existence. Now you must not misinterpret the whole thing as if the cat dislikes you, that is not the case. The cat neither likes nor dislikes, it does not seem to work with those distinctions. "I'd rather not", Bartleby replies to his boss when he asks his employee to perform a task. When the boss then, somewhat puzzled, wonders if Bartleby suggests that he does not intend to obey orders, Bartleby continues: "preferably not".⁶ By avoiding the language's linearly affective economy, Bartleby dismantles both the manager's position and his own. The workplace becomes nothing. It becomes the cats.

³ Ibid, p. 18.

⁴ Breakup forces facing the non-relation that accompanies conventional optimism about attachment and points to the necessity of fantasy within the ordinary to provide a ground for the extension of relation whether or not an adorable non-sovereign mutuality is achieved episodically or, as we will see, on the affective virtual plane of "forever. – Ibid, p. 22.

⁵ Anderson, P. "Recovering the Cynic Legacy: Divine Friendship in the Cosmopolitan Thought of Diogenes of Sinope", 2014, p. 16.

⁶ Melville, H. *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story Of Wall-street*, 1856.

The result that Bartleby's manager expected to achieve through the order is reminiscent of how most people today expect to be able to trade with money. That is; to use an already acquired resource – social or monetary – to satisfy their desires. Pat the animal, buy the t-shirt. The pleasure that such a presumption brings just before the order is given, just before the banknote or palm is presented, Lauren Berlant calls that "cruel optimism". The purchase is expected to work. By optimism, she means the perspective of the surrounding world as if it were already ours. And when it comes to the social and the affective, we expect our relationships with the surrounding world – which may exist – to last. Of course, we are disappointed when we understand that this is not the case.⁷ This is where the cat's rough tongue comes into the picture. The sweater didn't fit and the animal's soft "meow" was not aimed at you. You are alone. No warming fur is there to sustain your existence or compensate for your existential confusion. The cat is Bartleby. It would rather escape, but it stays put. In the middle of the floor, in the office, in the city. And it's adorable.

There you stand. The love that you really needed for yourself has since long seeped through your fingers and down to the floor. You sit down, look around, and notices that the terry mat is a street. Soft as the soles of your own feet, it's just like the sun-warmed asphalt was laid out for you. It's your street and just behind there, you have your shoulder. Gently you turn your head and stretch your chin towards the shoulder blade, open your mouth and let your tongue meet your torso. It is covered in fur, fur that you can now enjoy as much as you want. It embraces your whole body and it shines. You start licking.

This text is part of Pontus Pettersson's exhibition The Egg, the Cat and the Poem - where the surface tears. The exhibition took place at Art Gallery C in Hökarängen 6-28 April 2019.

Translation from Swedish My Carnestedt

⁷ Berlant, L. Cruel Optimism. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 28.